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John Moe: If you go swimming in an area that is swarming with sharks—and please don't—but if you do, and you develop a bunch of deep lacerations and missing body chunks, you probably won't be very surprised. You'll probably think, “Well, yeah, I went where the sharks were. That's what sharks do.” You will know that the fault isn't in your swimming; it's what was around you. If you take a barefoot walk in a big field with broken glass all over the place—and again, don't—and you come away with cuts on your feet? It's not a big mystery how those got there. It was the glass that was all over where you were walking. The fault wasn't yours. The fault wasn't in your footwork.

How about this one? If you live in a society that discriminates against people based on race, ethnicity, gender orientation, disability, and you happen to be on the side of the ledger that the system is designed to discriminate against, and you develop some mental health issues as a result? Maybe it's the system. Maybe the fault isn't in you. Or if you're anyone living in a society built around having to defeat everyone else while everyone else tries to defeat you, I think that might make you a little messed up in a way that isn't your fault.

It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: I've been thinking a lot lately about mental illness and how much of it is individual chemistry or genetic destiny, and how much is a rational response to the world we live in. The whole, “It's not you; it's this”—I'm gesturing now to everything—idea. How much is the world that we share—the world we don't share well or fairly—to blame for what's going on with our brains? Depression, anxiety, trauma response. Are these things happening because we view the world through a distortion we call mental illness? Or are they happening because we see the world extremely clearly? Do we have broken minds, or do we live in a broken world full of the aforementioned metaphorical sharks and broken glass?

Dr. Jonathan Mathias Lassiter is a psychologist and therapist based in New York City. He's the author of the new book *How I Know White People Are Crazy and Other Stories*. It's partially a memoir about his life growing up with a chronic illness and gay in a southern family that frowned on homosexuality and that had been deeply affected by generations of racism. He eventually goes on to higher education, ultimately getting his PhD in psychology and working in academia—sometimes as the only person of color in a college psychology department. The book is also about the phenomenon of Whiteness—not about being White but about living in a society defined by the idea of Whiteness. Dr. Lassiter is Black. I'm White.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Dr. Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

John Moe: I read the book, *How I Know White People are Crazy and Other Stories*. I enjoyed it very much. Maybe start here. I'd like to start with having you define Whiteness.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yes! So, Whiteness is a mindset, the way that I define it. And it is based on living life around three different assumptions. And those assumptions are: there's not enough to go around; kill or be killed; and us versus them or divide and conquer. Right? And so, when people live in this way, they often end up valuing individualism, competition, and material resources—money, titles, et cetera—which disconnects them from their relationships, or relationships become exploitative, transactional, et cetera. And it can cause them to suppress their emotions, not recognize the emotions of others as valid, as well as be silent in the face of oppression or collude in oppression.

That's how I define the Whiteness mindset.

John Moe: It sounds like a description of a White majority United States or other countries that have White majorities.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: That has been my personal experience and my understanding of history.

John Moe: Okay. Alright. And is Whiteness a disorder?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: I definitely think it is a mental health problem.

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And I think it is a mental health problem that disorders the world—meaning it makes the world a place that is chaotic. We see it all around us. So many of us are feeling it—particularly in the US context, but it's happening around the globe. That things that used to make sense or things that we thought, “You know, this had been decided.” I think of *Roe v. Wade*, right? So many people are like, “This had been decided.” And now it's a question.

John Moe: Nazis are bad.

(Jonathan agrees.)

I thought we'd settled on that one.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: I thought we had settled on that! Right? And now it's up for debate again. That is a disordered world. And where does that disorder come from? It comes from people being empowered who have this Whiteness mindset, this “us versus them”, this “killer or killed”. “I have to kill off your way of understanding, your way of behaving in the world, OR mine is gonna be killed off. And I can't have that.”

John Moe: Mm! Is that a colonialism mindset?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: I would say that this is a mindset that predates colonialism. However, colonialism comes out of this mindset. Actually, I would say all “isms”—racism, sexism, heterosexism—come out of this mindset.

John Moe: And when we talk about this being a mental health problem, is this a personal issue that someone can have or not have? Or are you looking at it as a thing that affects society as an entity itself?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: It is a “both, and”. And so, what I mean by that is that— I'm a psychologist, right? I'm trained as a psychologist. My PhD is in clinical psychology. And one of the ways in which we think about mental health problems are—it's not necessarily yes or no; you have it or you don't. Some things are like that, but very few are. Most of them are on a continuum. You have some level of this. Right? And if it reaches a certain level, then we have a bigger problem than if it's at a lower level. Right?

And so, when I think about the Whiteness mindset, I think about it in that sense—that it is on a continuum, we might say, from mild/moderate to severe. Right?

John Moe: And is the Whiteness mental health problem then—does it affect everybody regardless of race, in a situation like the United States?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: I definitely think it does. And I think not just in the United States, but I would say for most places globally, because of the ways in which European and Western ideas have been funneled into all societies across the globe—either through imperialism, cultural imperialism, militaristic imperialism, globalism, globalization. These things have made it so that the ideas of the West are not stuck in the west. They proliferate all over the globe. So, I would say it's a problem for everyone.

John Moe: When we think of this as a mental health problem, are we seeing it as a problem because it is a distortion of the way people actually ought to live, in your thinking? That we ought to live in a more cooperative way that celebrates each other and tries to not destroy each other? Is that the mental health aspect of it?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: 100%. Again, I'm trained as a psychologist, and one of the things that you learn as a psychologist is how to define abnormal behavior. And we often think of the three D's. I used to teach at the university, and when I was teaching abnormal psychology, I used to say, “Think of the three D's.”

One is: is the thing causing distress? Is the thing dangerous? Is the thing deviant from what we would think of as sort of what's customary? Right? And is the thing causing dysfunction?

When we look at the Whiteness mindset, we see that as all four of those. Does it cause distress? Yeah. I mean, look at the amount of people with anxiety disorders in our society. Look at the people who have depression and are onto antidepressants. Look at all the people who are having distress in their relationships. It is distressful. Is it dangerous? Yeah. Look at the wars across the globe. That's dangerous. Look at the exploitation of people's homes and resources being taken away. We have people who may be on the verge of starving to death

because of SNAP benefits—food stamps and things like that—being taken away because of the government shutdown. That's dangerous. Is it deviant? Yes, it's deviant from the ways that indigenous cultures—including African cultures—across the world have done things long before the advent of European societies.

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It deviates from how things were done in previous times. And it's dysfunctional. Right? It's causing people to not be able to function in healthy ways in their communities.

John Moe: I think the title of your book is wonderful and compelling. (*Chuckles.*) It certainly got our attention when we found out about it here. How do you know White people are crazy?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yes. And so, I'll be honest, that title is— A lot of that is marketing. Right? And what I mean—

John Moe: (*Laughs.*) It's good marketing! It's really good marketing.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: (*Laughs.*) And what I mean by that is that the book is not just about White people being crazy. The thesis in the book is that at a certain level we're all crazy. And again, how I'm defining crazy is that when we do things that we know harms us—that harms us over and over again, and yet we do those things over and over again—that is my definition of crazy. So, how I know White people are crazy builds off the story of my father, who was a Black man who was born in 1950s Georgia. And he used to go out and train his White male counterparts at the pest control company he worked at. And then instead of getting the promotion when it was time for promotion, they would promote that younger White man that he had trained. And he would come home and he would say, “Boy, these White people are crazy.”

And as a child, you know, I didn't really understand what that meant. (*Chuckling.*) But then as I became an adult myself, I was like, “Oh, okay. I'm starting to get what he's talking about.” And what he's talking about is the racism—right?—that comes out, which is the outgrowth of the Whiteness mindset. Also, that title refers to—well, an essay in the book called “How I Know White People Are Crazy”. And that was sort of like my personal experience of understanding what my father meant. And because I was on internship as a student, getting my PhD, and—long story short, they said, “You know, we value diversity. We want you and your fellow interns”—it was two other White women and myself, and this is this all White training staff; and they're telling us, “Go out and put yourself in a situation where you are a minority for two hours, and come back and tell us about it.”

And so, I am a Black man. I'm a same-gender loving man. I am a man who—I was born in a working-class household. And I have a chronic illness. I was born with sickle cell anemia. So, I'm thinking to myself, “When am I not a minority?” (*Chuckles.*) However, you know, I'm disempowered. I'm a student, so I'm like, “Okay, let me just do what they say so I can graduate.” So, I go out. I do the assignment.

They say, “Oh, well you may be a minority in all those ways, but you don't really like sports. So, go to a sporting event, and come back and tell us about it. You'll be a minority in a different way.” Right?

And so, I go and I do that. And then they come back, and I tell them about how I went to a sports bar, I watched a sports game, et cetera. And they were like, “Oh. No, you didn't really experience what it was like to be a minority. You didn't experience sports culture. We want you to do it again.”

So, basically, they failed me. (*Chuckles.*) The Black, same-gender loving guy with a chronic illness from a working-class background is failed on a diversity project. And so, in that moment I said to myself, “These White people are crazy!”

(*They laugh.*)

Because, how else could I describe that? It was completely absurd in that moment.

John Moe: I love the idea that sports fans are a disadvantaged group somehow? That you need to go spend time among them?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: It made no sense to me. Again, though, I'm a student, right? And so, I just wanna graduate. So, I'm like, “Whatever you say.”

John Moe: Jump through the hoops.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Jump through the hoops. But again, it made no sense. It was absurd. And the project itself is absurd, because it assumes that the trainee is not from a marginalized background already.

John Moe: It assumes Whiteness, basically.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: It assumes Whiteness. It assumes privilege. And so, the assignment itself was inappropriate from the jump. And unfortunately, too many people from marginalized backgrounds who pursue education, advanced degrees, experience that type of situation where they have to jump through these hoops and silence their voices in environments that are not meant for them. My supervisors may have thought, “Oh, I may have a client from a marginalized background, but the psychologist is always going to be a White, privileged person.”

John Moe: Yeah.

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Or at least coming at it from a White, European—you know, maybe Freud; maybe some of these other psychologists that's sort of the foundation of what the society and academia understands psychology to be.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Exactly. Exactly. And I didn't fit that mold, and because I didn't fit that mold, I had no space in the sort of way that they thought about these things and what diversity meant. And in that way, diversity—again—was for those White, privileged people. It wasn't for someone already from a marginalized background.

John Moe: I wonder if you could share the part of that story where somebody else in the same program previously had gone to a Black church.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yes! *(Laughing.)* So, you're talking—*(laughs)*. So, yeah, in that same chapter, I write about the example that we were given as the gold star project. So, the year before there was this woman, who was also a trainee at the time. But she—in the book, I named her Caroline; of course, that is a fictitious name to protect the innocent. Right? *(Chuckles.)* But Caroline had went to a Black church—White woman, had went to a Black church. And she went in that space, and she came back and she told the all-White training committee, “Oh my gosh! I went to this Black church, and everyone was so friendly. They were so nice. They had these big hats. I was really scared when I went into that space. I didn't know if they would accept me.”

And my supervisors thought that that was a great example of putting yourself in a situation where you are a minority, where you are at risk. And I'm sitting there as a Black, same-gender loving man who grew up in the Black church in the south thinking, “What?! *(Laughs.)* What did you think they were going to do?! Did you think they were going to eat you or something?! Like, what do you mean?” “Oh my God, they were so nice.” You know? It was—really, the assignment was just ludicrous and absurd all the way around.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Dr. Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, including a look at generational trauma in just a moment.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: We're back talking with Dr. Jonathan Matthias Lassiter, author of *How I Know White People Are Crazy and Other Stories*.

You mentioned your father. And in the book, you write about your grandfather too. And I'm really interested in what your grandfather went through, what your father went through, what was handed down to you, and what you've carried with you from generational trauma.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yes. So, I do write about generational trauma in the book, and I write about it through the lens of my father witnessing his father—my grandfather—who I actually never knew; he died when I was like maybe three or something. So, I never actually knew him, but his name was John Mathias Sr.—my father's John Mathias Jr. It was 1955. My father—no, 1957 I believe. My father was a 7-year-old. He and his family are in a small town in middle Georgia. They are going to the movie theater—it's still segregated south. They're

going to a movie theater. And... these two young White men—younger than my grandfather at the time—come down the sidewalk.

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And they say to my father and his family and my grandfather—he says to my grandfather in particular, “Hey, boy, what are you doing on the sidewalk? You know you're not supposed to be on the sidewalk when we come by.” So, to anyone watching this at this time, it's just a normal Saturday. That's not out of the ordinary. However, for my father—who looked up to his father, my grandfather, as the most important person on the planet—what he witnessed in that moment was his father—a grown man; the star of his world—being turned into a powerless boy. Literally, they called him boy, right? And he's powerless to retaliate. Because as a Black man at that time, if he would have retaliated, he would have even been put in jail or killed or both.

And so, what this communicates to my father is that you must build up an armor to shield yourself from that type of both physical and psychological/emotional assault. And so, my father takes that lesson and then tries to put that on my brother and me. And he teaches us from a very young age you gotta be strong, you gotta be tough, you a Black man in the world, you can't let anyone see you cry, et cetera, et cetera. You gotta know how to stand up for yourself, protect you and your family. So, it was all of these things about being aggressive, being strong, not having emotions. And—

John Moe: No vulnerabilities.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: No vulnerabilities. And this doesn't work for me! Because again, I'm born with a chronic illness, so I'm sick a lot. I'm not, you know, physically strong in a traditional way because of my illness. And I'm super emotional, which was the exact opposite of what my father was trying to do. And so, I learn that something's wrong with me, because I'm not able to suppress my emotions in the way that my father believes that—as a young, Black boy—I need to do.

And so, I see that story as an example of how the Whiteness mindset, played out through racism, affects a family and has an emotional/psychological toll across generations.

John Moe: And so, what from that lineage are you stuck with forever? And what have you shaken free from? What have you confronted? What have you changed? And what can't you change?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yeah, so what I will say is that what I was stuck with was this sense of achieving at a very high level and never letting people see you sweat. So, I remember when I was getting my PhD and I was in graduate school, I was like, “By any means necessary,” right? Like, these people aren't gonna break me. No one's gonna see me sweat. I'm always gonna be excellent.

John Moe: No vulnerabilities.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: No vulnerabilities, right? I'm always gonna be top of class. Right? No one's ever gonna be able to come for me. No one's gonna say that he doesn't deserve to be here. No one's gonna say he got in because he's Black. No, I'm the most intelligent person in the room. Right? So, that is definitely how that played out in me. However, because of my emotional vulnerability from being sick as a child, but also from my inability to be a boy and be masculine, I also was able to reject a lot of that. Because it just didn't fit onto me. And I had a mother who very much valued emotional vulnerability and emotional expression. And so, that also served me. And it serves me now in my profession as a psychologist, where a lot of my work is helping people get in touch with their emotions and express those emotions.

John Moe: Yeah, I mean that's interesting that that's the line of work you went into. What interested you in psychology as a career?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Again, trying to understand my father, trying to understand myself. As I write in the book, there was a time where I was very scared of rejection—both from my family and from God. I grew up very Christian. Due to my sexual orientation, I thought that I would be rejected. And I became very, very depressed. And so, psychology became a way for me to understand my emotions, and it became a way for me to understand my father's lack of emotions.

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And so, the more that I started to study psychology, the more that that study gave me language for what I was seeing and what I was feeling.

John Moe: Yeah. You mentioned in the book that you had recurrent storms of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. How far back did those go, and how did they present themselves?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yeah, I would say they went back as far as probably childhood. I mean, the reason for those shifted. Yet they—I would say it's starting in childhood. 'Cause I remember, again, being very sick. Like, literally my mom tells the story of how one time when I had a sickle cell crisis. And for people that don't know what sickle cell anemia is, it is a genetic blood disorder where your red blood cells drain the blood—or it stops the oxygen from that particular area in your body. And your tissue or organs literally start to die. And so, it can cause a lot of pain. And so, I would say pain, like I would—I always thought of it as like feeling like 1,000 knives were stabbing me at the same time.

Yeah. And so, I would be hospitalized when I had these sort of sickle cell crises as a child. But having that over and over again—I mean, it happened a lot. I got really depressed. I would ask God, “Why me?” You know, I was trying to make sense out of it. And so, I would say from that early age—like, four or five—I was depressed, you know? And then as I got older, my health became a little bit better. Right? There is no cure for sickle cell anemia right now, so I still have it, but it's not as bad as it was then. And then in addition to being depressed about sickle cell anemia, I became depressed about my burgeoning sexuality that I found that I couldn't change as much as I wanted to change it due to my Christian beliefs at that time. And then I was also depressed. And I used to pray, “God, please change me.” And

when God didn't change me—because guess what? That's not how it works. I know that now, but as a teenager, I didn't. I would say, “Well, just let me die in my sleep, 'cause I don't want to like sin and go to hell.”

John Moe: Yeah. Yeah. God. Growing up thinking that God was gonna send you to hell because of these things that you couldn't control and couldn't reverse.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yes.

John Moe: We had PE Moskowitz, the author PE Moskowitz, on the show a few weeks ago. And they talked about kind of rejecting the idea of having a mental disorder. They said it was a response. The depression, these other things that they had gone through, a mental breakdown that they had had, were responses to traumas they had been through and the state of the world as it's made up today.

How do you feel about that? Do you feel like these things are just rational responses to the cards that you've been dealt and the world that you're living in? Or are they problems that you are having, personally, that you can address?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: So, I think it's a “both, and”. Right? So—and what I mean by that is that part of this is societal. Because again, the Whiteness mindset—those three assumptions—if you go around thinking that there's not enough to go around, us versus them, killer be killed, and then you create systems that act as if those things are true, you get a disordered, dysfunctional world. You get a world that only cares about some but not all. Right? You get a world in which you shut down the government, take away people's food stamp benefits, but still pay Congress.

John Moe: And you get a system that perpetuates that for you.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Exactly. So, that makes people sick. Not being able to meet their basic needs makes people depressed. It makes them anxious. Right? So, there is a societal piece. There is also though— As a psychologist, what we also learn in that training is about the brain and neurotransmitters, right? So, there are some brain correlates—right?—that are responsible—or I should say are related to some mental health problems. So, I wouldn't completely rule out individual brain/hormonal/neurotransmitter/brain chemistry differences. And I would say though that if we had to give it a percentage, I would say much more what ails us or makes us, quote/unquote, “sick” or “disordered” as human beings is rooted in society.

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John Moe: Yeah. Yeah. The problem isn't a distortion; the problem is the clarity.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: *(Laughing.)* Yes! And that reminds me! That is such a great way to put it, and it reminds me of James Baldwin when he says to be Black in a state of conscious—to be Black and conscious is to be in almost a perpetual state of rage. Right? And I think that's true for all of us. If we are not ignorant— People say ignorance is bliss, right?

There's some truth to that. If you don't understand how the system is designed based on this Whiteness mindset—this very narrowing of how we understand the world—that then if we don't understand that, then we can be ignorant, and we can live in a blissful world.

But when you understand that and you see just how baked-in it is in society, it can cause you to be very angry. It could cause you to be very depressed. Some people feel hopeless about it. So, yeah, it definitely is that consciousness at some level that can cause us to feel distressed.

John Moe: Are you angry and depressed and hopeless?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: That is so interesting (*chuckles*) that you ask me that question. Because a couple of years back, my brother and I were having a conversation. And as I said, I'm from a working-class background, and so I'm really the only one from my family to go to college—to complete college. My brother went to college; he didn't finish. I'm the only one in my family to complete college. I'm the only doctor in my family. And so, my brother—you know, great guy. He asked me— You know, he's a truck driver, and he said— At the time I was a professor and I was teaching like two days a week. And he was like, “Jonathan, like you work two days a week, man!” (*Laughing.*) Like, you know. Like, “You sound like you not happy!”

And I'm like, “I'm not happy.” Right? I'm like, “I'm not happy.” I was like, “You know why I'm not happy? Because it's not just about me. Right? The fact that you don't have autonomy over your work schedule; the fact that if you aren't working, you don't get paid; the fact that you don't have healthcare insurance; the fact that other people in your profession don't have the same benefits that I have makes me sad. It makes me depressed.” Right? The Whiteness mindset, us versus them, that assumption tells us that we should only care about ourselves. It tells us that we should only be concerned about our individual success.

But I don't subscribe to that mindset. Right? So, it's not just enough for me to be a doctor, for me to have a, quote/unquote, “white-collar” profession. As long as injustice exists, I'm not going to be blissful.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Dr. Lassiter in just a moment, including adventures in academia.

Promo:

Music: A relaxed, jazzy tune.

Travis McElroy: Hi, I am Travis McElroy. I'm here with Maria, and we're excited. Because as a member of the month— Maria, thank you so much for being a listener and a supporter of the show.

Maria: Hi!

Travis: How did you find out about the shows?

Maria: When my daughter was in high school, we kind of connected over *TAZ*. She introduced me to *Shmanners* and *Sawbones*.

Travis: What made you decide to become a MaxFun member?

Maria: I kind of decided that with the economy being so difficult, it was worth me giving up my Starbucks to join in with you guys.

Travis: Well, Maria, I owe you a cup of coffee then. At some point I'll get a cup of coffee into your hands to pay you back.

Maria: *(Laughing.)* Okay.

Travis: Maria, again, thank you so much for your support.

Maria: Thank you very, very much for your time and getting a chance to be the member of the month. My daughter was shocked when she found out about it, so I can't wait for her to actually maybe catch a little bit of this. I can rub it in her face a little bit.

Travis: That's what we do it for. Thank you and thanks to everybody for your support. Maria, have a great month!

Maria: You have an amazing month as well.

Speaker: Become a MaxFun member now at MaximumFun.org/join.

(Music ends.)

Promo:

Music: Exciting synth.

Mallory O'Meara: Hey, there! Do you like books about various shades of gray?

Brea Grant: Maybe 50 of 'em? Or books about winged men searching for soulmates?

Mallory: Is your e-reader full of stories that would pair well with Barry White in the background?

Brea: We're Brea and Mallory of *Reading Glasses*, and we have a brand-new show for people who crave reads with just a dash of sriracha sauce.

[00:35:00]

Mallory: That's right! Every other Friday we dive into books that can be measured on the Scoville scale and talk about reading to the people who love them.

Brea: You can find our new show by visiting MaximumFun.org/spicy. That's MaximumFun.org/spicy.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back talking with Dr. Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, author of *How I Know White People Are Crazy and Other Stories*.

In the book you describe some frustrating experiences in academia—frustrating is putting it too mildly. But like being the only person of color in an entire college department. It seems like the way academia is set up is even a more condensed, concentrated version of this Whiteness problem that you describe. Like, how did that go for you with an awareness of this kind of thing that you already had? How were you able to survive?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Well—one, when you say that, I immediately think, “What does it mean to survive?” *(Chuckles.)*

John Moe: Yeah. Well, fair enough.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: So, that's one question I have. And I think— Another thing I think about is part of the reason why I wanted to go into academia is because I wanted to be an example for students from the global majority, for people from marginalized backgrounds, LGBTQ+ students who did not see themselves in the front of the classroom. I wanted to be that example. I want— Because we know that representation matters. And when you see people in a profession that look like you who have a shared lived experience, then you can imagine yourself in that profession. And what I do know as a psychologist is that we need people from the global majority—Black people, Latinx people, LGBTQ+ people, et cetera—we need them as therapists; we need them as psychology professors; we need them as mental health providers. And so, I really wanted to go into the field to be that example.

But what I learned in the field. And once I got there—which how could I know before I got there? But what I learned when I got there was that people say things, but they don't mean them. And what I mean by that is that often my colleagues talked about how much they valued diversity, but when it was time to put policies into place, they didn't do it. When it was

time to do a faculty hire to hire a new professor, they made very minimal effort to seek applicants outside of the small pool of people that they knew, that they went to school with—their alma maters. They did not reach out to any ethnic organizations—right? Ethnic psychological organizations. They didn't reach out to any queer psychological organizations. None of that. And— So, they basically end up hiring more people like themselves. Other White, heterosexual, middle class people into this profession.

And so, as much as I—as a singular individual—tried to bring in students from those marginalized backgrounds, what I found is that as much as I tried to support those students, once they got there, my colleagues had created an environment that was pushing them out. That was not welcoming to them. And so, I thought to myself, “Am I integrating—?” I think about King—right? Dr. Martin Luther King. “Am I integrating my people into a burning house?” And that's what being a professor on a psychology faculty began to feel like when I would bring students from marginalized backgrounds into that space to get a psychology education. It started to feel like I was bringing them into a burning house. And that is not survival.

John Moe: And that's not gonna feel good for you or for any of those students.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Exactly.

John Moe: Yeah. It also seems to me like the task that you take on for being that example to these students—or to these people in these groups—that's an enormous weight that you're putting on your shoulders. Like, you know, it seems very selfish to only live for your own success and not the success of others, as you've said. But it also seems very heavy to try to turn the tide with your own efforts. It seems like that's setting yourself up to be potentially crushed by the weight, the enormity, of that task.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Definitely. That is the risk that one takes for freedom, for liberation.

[00:40:00]

So, again, one of the great luminaries—someone that I look up to—is Toni Morrison. And Toni Morrison has been quoted as saying that when she was teaching at these Ivy League universities, one thing that she used to tell her students is that when you get these degrees that you have been so prepared for, the point is not to just get a high paying job; the point is to liberate someone else.

And so, that is how I felt about my education. That's still how I feel about my education. I'm doing it in a different way now. I'm doing it through this book instead of by being in front of a classroom now. However, that is what I feel is my responsibility as someone with an advanced education, as someone with an understanding of psychology beyond the ideas of European and White Americans. I understand that psychology is not just the study of the brain and behavior, but it's also the illumination of the human spirit. That definition goes back to the original people on Earth, which were people on the African continent. Right?

And so, with that knowledge, with that understanding, I have a responsibility to bring that to others. And is it a risk? Is it heavy? Yes. But I— Not “but.” And I also know that I am a person through other persons, which is a South African concept—Ubuntu. And because I am a person through other persons, that means I have a responsibility to others. And I take that very seriously.

John Moe: So, besides writing this book and putting this book out into the world, are you a practicing therapist now? Like, do you see clients?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Yeah, so I recently transitioned from academia—for all the reasons that we just talked about and that I describe in the book—to full-time private practice. And so, I am in full-time private practice in New York City, and I very much love the work that I do. I work with people from marginalized backgrounds who are dealing with a lot of problems, from depression/anxiety, to coping with discrimination, family trauma, relationship issues, et cetera. And I treat them from a culturally informed place, which integrates both the things that I was taught in my PhD education, also the things that I learned from my own self-study looking at indigenous forms of psychology that go back to the Mayan, that go back to the West African, et cetera. So, I bring all those things, all those schools of thought, into my work and working with my clients now as I practice.

I also do a lot of workshops for the community. I also am offering online courses for people who wanna learn more about African-centered psychology, which is a way to think about what it means to be human outside of—again—those European men like Freud and those White men like Young and Carl Rogers and people like that.

John Moe: So, when you're working with a client, are you explaining to them some of these thoughts from the book—the idea of Whiteness and kind of what it means—and applying that to the relationship trouble that they're bringing to you?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: So, as a psychologist, most of us don't explain what we're doing (*laughs*) with our clients. Right? Even if even someone who's using Freud theories and doing psychoanalysis, they're not necessarily saying, “I'm doing psychoanalysis right now! This is an enactment! Right?”

John Moe: They don't issue citations or footnotes during the session.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Right. We don't do that in the session. However, I am thinking with those ideas. Right? I am thinking, “Is this an example of Whiteness? Is this something that is indigenous to this person, or is this a foreign concept? Are they trying to live their life in a way that is harming them, but it's something that they've been told is better than the way in which feels authentic for them to live?” So, I am thinking through those ways, and I am helping them learn strategies and behaviors to counter Whiteness and things like that, even though I may not be saying those words out loud in the session.

John Moe: So, you're on a mission to help disadvantaged people. I mean, this is what I'm hearing through the whole book and through the history of your career.

[00:45:00]

Are you finding that more accessible to do that in the field of therapy than in academia?

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: So, I definitely think it is much more direct and maybe expedient, I will say, than it is in academia. Because in the therapy room, it is myself and the client or myself and the couple. You know? Myself and the family. And I'm able to have a much more direct impact. Whereas as a professor, I would have a direct impact on my students. But what would happen then? They would then go and be indoctrinated by all my other colleagues who did not have this understanding that I have. And it was harmful for not only my students from the global majority, those students from marginalized backgrounds; it's also harmful for my White students.

I mean, let's be honest, I taught in predominantly White institutions, so most of my students were White students. And these White students, when they took my class—that was either African American psychology or Multicultural Psychology, Multicultural Perspectives, things like that, Abnormal Psychology—they would say to me, “Dr. Lassiter, you're telling me about these systems of oppression. You're teaching us about African-centered psychology. How come I've never heard of this? You're teaching me about, you know, disability rights and how that influences how we think about mental health problems such as autism and ADHD. No one has ever told me this. Why not?!”

So, this is not just liberating the minds of people from marginalized backgrounds. This way of thinking, this way of understanding the world, this way of going beyond Eurocentric psychology also liberates White students and White people.

John Moe: Dr. Jonathan Mathias Lassiter is the author of *How I Know White People Are Crazy and Other Stories*. Dr. Lassiter, thank you so much.

Jonathan Mathias Lassiter: Thank you!

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

John Moe: *How I Know White People Are Crazy and Other Stories: Notes from a Frustrated Black Psychologist* is available on November 4th, and it is available for pre-order now, wherever you get your books.

Thank you for listening to the show. Thank you for opening your mind and expanding your view of mental health and this world that we share, that we do our best to share in together. Speaking of sharing together, our show exists because people donate to it. That's our main source of revenue to keep the show going. If you think conversations like this are valuable, if you enjoy hearing them, if you enjoy the idea that other people are hearing them, help us out—won't you? Just kick us a few bucks. It's so easy to do.

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Hi, credits listeners. I'm in one of a few golden periods in St. Paul, Minnesota right now, when it's warm enough to take a walk, cold enough to not get all sweaty outside. The leaves are just starting to fall. However, I know that in an instant—depending on what happens next—I could suddenly need to mow or rake or shovel snow at any time. And possibly all on the same day. So, I'm happy, but I'm vigilant.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”.

[00:50:00]

Depresh Mode is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now!

Music:

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

Larry: This is Larry from Boyertown, Pennsylvania, and you are not alone.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

Speaker 1: Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: A worker-owned network.

Speaker 3: Of artist owned shows.

Speaker 4: Supported—

Speaker 5: —directly—

Speaker 6: —by you!